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# Locals lead in preservation

Trust aims to keep rural flavor

By Paula R. Hastings  
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DUXBURY — Mark Primack likes to blow a train whistle for people. Then he heads back to his office on West Street in an old goat shed, to do the business of a land trust.

Primack blows the train whistle to prove a point: where the commuter train goes, developers follow. And before you know it, he says, towns in southeastern Massachusetts could lose the very character that makes people want to live here.

That character is rural, more rural than any other area around Boston, Primack says. But because of transportation improvements — trains and better highways — he says the area could become suburban within just a few years.

"Draw a 15-minute driving radius around every MBTA train station, and you'll have a suburb," Primack says.

From his one-room office, he supervises construction of a new office next door that will add a more professional air to the headquarters of the only regional land trust in the state — the newly renamed Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts.

The organization, until recently called the Plymouth County Wildlands Trust, began in the '70s as a sleepy, somewhat passive group of



Staff photo/Paula R. Hastings

**Greenkeepers** — To keep her land from being developed, Helen Philbrick, with executive director Mark Primack, donated her property to the land trust.

women interested in preserving nature. One of the trust's earliest members and current board member Helen Philbrick has seen the group grow

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and adopt a more aggressive acquisition philosophy. She recently donated her five-acre lot and her 165 West St. house — complete with the old goat shed turned office — to the trust. By agreement, she will live in the house as long as she wishes.

Philbrick, who is 85, says she gave the property to the trust because she's an idealist who wants to preserve a bit of nature.

"My late husband was a clergyman, and he and I were very active in organic gardening. I gave the land to the trust because the principle of saving green land is an extension of the same idealism we had in our gardening. It's so important now that there is so much building going on," Philbrick says.

Philbrick's bequest is one of 60 properties given to the trust over the years. Most — 55 — have been given outright, but a few have been gifts of a different nature: they allow the trust to keep permanent conservation restriction or agricultural preservation rights. That means that the property can be sold, but no one can ever build on it.

In the '60s and '70s, Philbrick says, there was a boom in land trusts. The movement swept the country, representing a new way of saving open space. There are a thousand or so land trusts across the country, and approximately 100 in Massachusetts.

Land trusts became popular as a way of preserving property that would otherwise have to be sold due to high tax levies.

Families with large parcels of property found that bequests to children meant the children had to pay inheritance taxes almost immediately on the development value, says Primack. This often put them into a high tax bracket.

"The only way they could pay the taxes was to sell the property. Giving the land to a trust saved them money and allowed them to assure that a beloved property would remain unspoiled," Primack says.

Only two of the trustees' properties have houses on them: Philbrick's, and the 27-acre Capt. David Cushman Jr. Preserve, on Anchorage Lane off St. George Street, which was given to the trust by the captain's granddaughter in 1985. Primack lives in the St. George Street house, a perk that allowed him, the state's former deputy commissioner of transportation, to afford the otherwise modest-paying job as the

trust's first executive director. Primack spends his spare time restoring the property.

It is gifts like Cushman's and Philbrick's that help keep the character of Duxbury, Primack says.

"Think about what it would be like if Lura Cushman had sold this property rather than donating it to us," Primack says, sitting on the spacious but unfurnished veranda of his digs. "Instead of a splendid view of woodlands from the Bluefish River bridge, you'd see 14 houses. That would change the character of the town."

Board member John Nash, a long-time proponent of conservation, says Duxbury's pro-conservation actions over the years motivated him to become involved in the trust.

"Little did we know that if we hadn't done the right things, Duxbury would have been a different place. I've seen what foresight can do, and the trust is a way of carrying it on," Nash says.

Many of the trust's properties are open to the public as nature preserves, with walking trails winding through fields, woodlands, marshes and meadows.

Primack says that although coastal towns don't need much help from preservationists because they have town planners and conservation agents, inland towns are another story.

"Go one town inland, to towns like Plympton, Halifax, and Carver, and you'll see communities under tremendous development pressures without the tools to manage growth the right way. The only way to have development the right way is through planning," says Primack.

He says the results of growth are irreversible.

Referring to the Wal-Mart project planned in Halifax, Primack says, "Now people might say, 'Where is Halifax?' In a few years they might be saying, 'Where was Halifax?'"

The trust owns approximately 2,000 acres in Plymouth, Barnstable and Bristol counties. In addition to the Philbrick and Cushman properties, it owns Great Harry Foot Island in Duxbury.

Among the largest trust properties are the 115-acre Old Field Pond Preserve in Bourne, the 116-acre Emery Preserve and the 232-acre West Shore Preserve/Halfway Pond in Plymouth, and the 110-acre Stephen Delano Memorial Forest in Rochester.